

presses him close again, from behind. For a moment—just a moment—the birds are still and Manny feels warmth against him.

Michele wrenches away, shaking his head. “No—”

“She never cared about you,” says Manny, hot with want, walking toward the kid. Burning. Michele shoves him back, hard. The peacocks are screeching now, and flapping, but there’s nowhere for them to go. Manny comes at him still. “She didn’t. You’re a kid.” The boy tries to leave, groping drunk for the gate in the half-light. “A stupid, sad, foreign kid with a dead friend and too much money. That’s all you are, understand? I did you a favor.”

Later, Manny will say it happened quick—the swing so fast it was a blur, the boy all sweet inertia, a dervish, and the rake’s prongs just a flash. Then he left, waited for his cab on the side of the road and never came back. But in truth Manny sees everything slow. The boy’s arched back. The contours of his ribs through his T-shirt. The blood around his nose and mouth already maroon with coagulate. His triceps made taut by the weight of the tool. The swing misses Manny so wildly that he doesn’t even move his feet. Michele wrenches the rake’s metal teeth into White Pine’s chest.

For an instant the air is filled with the report of the sternum snapping. Michele’s never seen a bird like this. The snowy feathers redden as blood wells up around the prongs. He feels the give of the meat as he plies the rake from the bird’s breast. Its beak opens and closes, leaking the tight sorrowful cry of a baby, a cry that will come to mean America.

WISH YOU WERE HERE

It begins with a man and a woman. They are young, but not so young as they would like. They fall in love. They marry. They have a child. They buy an adobe house in a small town where all the houses are adobe. The McDonald’s is adobe. The young man is named Carter. Carter often points to the adobe McDonald’s as proof of what a good decision they made in moving away from the city. The woman, Marin, is also glad they’ve moved here, but she misses her friends, and the constant sound of city traffic whispering like the sea. She feels this little town tries too hard.

As soon as Carter and Marin learn they’ve conceived the child, they begin to argue about it. What will they feed it, what will they teach it, what of this world will they allow it to see? They fight about these things before the child is more than a

wafer of cells. Before the child is anything, it is a catalyst for fights.

All the fights are the same fight: Carter wants to be sure Marin will change for their child. She has irresponsible habits. She eats poorly. She never exercises. She is terrible with money. She smokes and watches too much TV and gets bored easily and antagonizes people at parties.

Carter used to be fine with her habits. They were the things he once loved about her. Marin points this out, many times. She asks who it is he thinks he married. A child changes things, he says. A child is sacrifice. This is inarguable, and eventually she gives up arguing it. Each day he has a new stream of questions about what kind of mother she will be.

Does she plan on using disposable diapers?

Of course not.

Will she allow the child to watch television?

Only in small amounts. No. No. Not at all.

Will she use a microwave to heat the child's food?

Never.

When he was a boy, Carter says, his family had a garden where they grew fresh fruits and vegetables. He's told Marin about this garden, many times. The garden was monstrously fecund. His mother spent days and days in their basement, canning its yields. He wants to know, Will she garden? Will she can?

Of course, she says.

Why does she say this? She doesn't know. She is not willing to can.

Marin never cooks. For dinner, she likes to make herself

cereal or cheese and crackers or half an English muffin with mayonnaise and a microwaved egg on top. This is another thing that will have to change. Carter never cooks either, but this is not something that will have to change. Carter has seven brothers and sisters and when he was a boy, he says, his mother made them all a healthy, hot meal, every single night. She never used a microwave.

When he was a boy, Carter says, his family never ate out. He and Marin are always eating out. Their refrigerator is crammed with wire-handled Chinese takeout boxes and containers of pasta with the lids pinched on and Styrofoam clamshells of crab cakes and vegetable quesadillas and leftover restaurant steaks wrapped in aluminum foil. Marin pretends to be apologetic about these—it's just that they're so busy, she says. But she likes eating out. She is comforted by the choreography of a restaurant. And she likes to bring the leftover steaks to bed and gnaw on them, cold, while she watches TV.

A memory Marin often excavates during their arguments:

They'd been dating only three months when Carter asked her to meet his parents. It had just rained and the two of them were walking to the BART station, trading easy jokes about the terrible, bombastic movie they'd just seen. Carter stopped on the shining, still-wet sidewalk and took her hand. Come home with me, he said. She loved the urgency of the question, and how fearlessly he asked it.

The next morning they drove from San Francisco to Seattle, then continued north to a suburb of Seattle. It was his mother's fiftieth birthday, and their visit was a surprise. When

they arrived, Carter's mother held Marin as though she were her own baby. His mother did not have a bank account, Marin learned. His mother did not have a driver's license. She was cooking her own birthday dinner.

In the kitchen, Marin wanted to seem helpful. She opened the door of the pantry to reveal a wall of hand-canned fruits and vegetables. The stained-glass colors of tomatoes, yellow squash, zucchini and green beans. Carrot spears, halved beets, apricots, rings of apple. Small shriveled pickles and relish and a row of homogeneous dun-colored jams. Pearl onions like eyeballs.

In the pantry Marin said, I need some air. No one heard her. She walked to the tennis courts across the street and smoked just a tiny bit of a stale joint she kept in her compact. Small white moths flitted silently in the halos of the court lights, and she watched these until she felt a little better. She returned to the house and over dinner she saw quite clearly that she was attending the birthday celebration of a fifty-year-old woman who had never had an orgasm.

On the long drive home, Marin sat silently with her anxieties, turning them over in her head. She had a tendency to be self-destructive, she knew. Before Carter, her life had been a string of beautiful, aloof men with names like the four legs of a very sturdy table. Even now she had the urge to call one of them up and see if he still knew his way around her. She could pass a whole day inflaming the listlessness inside her with erotic fantasies of men who, for the most part, had been unkind to her.

When was she going to grow up?

She looked at Carter. He smiled, bleary-eyed from the drive, and put his hand on the back of her neck. She was twenty-nine. He would be a good husband. A wonderful father. He loved her as though it had never occurred to him that he could feel otherwise. She wanted to be someone who deserved a love like that. She smiled back at him and cracked her window, feeling the stale air sucked from the rental car. She inhaled deeply, and when she exhaled she let her doubts slip out the window with her breath, littered them all along I-5.

Six months later, in April, Marin and Carter were married beneath a copse of papery crab-apple blossoms in Golden Gate Park. Carter had already found an impressive job in the progressive high desert town with the strict zoning laws. A place to raise a child. They bought their first car and hitched it to their moving truck and towed it out of California. Every hundred miles or so Marin asked Carter to pull over, and when he did she opened the door of the U-Haul and vomited on the side of the road.

They arrived in the adobe town and the questions began. Now Carter comes home from work and wants to know, what has she eaten today?

Has she exercised?

How much water has she drunk?

What is her temperature?

Did she nap?

In what position did she sleep?

I don't want to talk about it, she sometimes says.

We have to talk about it, he says.

He's right, she knows. They are going to have a child together. They have to talk about everything. They will always have to talk about everything.

The baby grows inside her. Carter brings home fruit and leafy greens and obscure whole grains Marin has never heard of. Before bed—when once he would have touched her—he leans down and speaks to her midsection. He insists on massaging her neck and feet, which do not bother her, and the knots running along either side of her spine, which do. Under his hands Marin cannot help but return to his mother's pantry. Everycolor walls of foodstuff close in around her. White moths flit around the watty bulb dangling from the ceiling. How briefly her life was her own.

Then, when the child is born, something unexpected happens. Carter's questions cease. Now the child has been here for eleven weeks and it is as though his points are moot. Or if not moot, then at least he does not raise them. She can tell he would like to—she can see their shadows traveling occasionally across his face—but he does not. Perhaps he finally loves her for who she is. Perhaps he sees that she is trying. Perhaps he is as tired as she is.

The weeks since the child was born have been exhausting but rewarding, too. The child lifts its head. He smiles. He sleeps on his father's chest. Marin takes photos. The child will want to see this someday.

This weekend they are taking their first trip as a family, meeting up with married friends from the city to go camping

at Lake Tahoe. On the plane the baby sleeps and Carter sleeps and in this peace Marin thinks for the first time how good it will feel to see these old friends from when they were young. She opens the in-flight magazine and there in the center spread are photos of the lake and captions which compare its waters to precious gems. Emerald. Sapphire. Aquamarine. She can see them there on the white ring of shore. Val. Jake. Old friends from before the child. How she's looked forward to sitting beside them on the shore of the largest alpine lake in North America.

They meet their friends at the campsite. Val and Jake have children of their own. They also have a dog. The children are four and six. The dog is a reddish color, a copper retriever. The group goes down to the water: Carter and Marin, Val and Jake, the children, the infant and the dog.

The beach is rockier than Marin would have liked, but the water is clearer than she could have imagined. Val and Carter swim with the children. Carter makes a spirited effort to teach the boy the front crawl—It starts with a glide, he says. The glide is everything—but the boy loses interest. Marin sits with the baby on a blanket under an umbrella. The baby wears a hat.

The dog runs wild wild wild. Runs like it's never run in its whole dog life. Jake throws a tennis ball and the dog brings it back. The dog wants so bad it doesn't know what it wants, and each time it returns Jake must wrest the ball from the folds of its wet black lipflesh. Jake throws the ball out into the water. He wears a baseball cap with white sweat lines creeping up the band. Once, the dog jumps up and knocks the bill of the hat,

and Jake lifts it slightly to reposition it. Marin is shocked to see he's lost most of the hair on the top of his head. His thick, sandy blond hair, once hearty as dune grass. She cannot imagine when this would have happened.

Each time the dog emerges from the lake it shakes itself violently, spraying Marin and the baby with stinking dog water. Jake ought to do something about this but doesn't. Marin tries to position the umbrella so as to protect the baby from both the dog and the sun, but the maneuver is impossible. She grows to hate the dog. The damn dog's name is Mingus. In her head she calls it Dingus. In her head she says, *Go away, Dingus. Dingus, go lay down. Bad Dingus.* Down the beach, a young couple is lying wrapped together in a single towel, kissing. Dingus bounds up to them and begins to growl. Jake calls to the dog, ineffectually. Sorry, he calls down the beach.

Poor kids, says Marin.

They're young, Jake says. Plenty of time for that.

Marin scoffs and Jake turns to her. He nods to the baby in its hat and says, *Been a while?*

Marin looks up at him, squinting. Too long, she says.

Carter and Jake had been on the diving team together in college. Of course, she ended up with Carter, years later. But it was Jake first. Marin can still remember the first time she saw him, in the backyard at a house party, standing barefoot in the moist grass, shifting his weight gently from one foot to the other. There was a crowd gathered around him. He rubbed his hands together and pursed his fine lips. His eyes met Marin's for a moment; then he flung himself backward,

landing sturdy and fantastic on his bare feet. His audience applauded, begging drunkenly for more as Jake slipped back into his shoes.

By sunset the gang returns to camp. Jake and Carter walk to the store to get beer and marshmallows. Despite their considerable protests, the children are forced to stay behind. Val and Marin start dinner. The baby sleeps faceup on a blanket in the shade. The children throw rocks and bark chips at Dingus. They scream at each other constantly. Val does not seem to hear them. A snaky twilight settles over the lake basin. There is a smell of wood smoke and the fires of adjacent campsites visible between the branchless trunks of pine.

The men return. Hatless now and rosy headed, Jake sets a twelve-pack of IPA on the picnic table, where Marin is shucking corn. Carter goes to the baby and lifts him from the blanket. Nearby, reddening charcoal biscuits throb in the campsite grill. Val sorts through the groceries the men brought. She turns to Jake, wagging a wet package of hot dogs at him. Why did you buy these?

You like them, Jake says. Remember? We had them in Mammoth. You were surprised how much flavor could fit into such a skinny frank.

But I have chicken, says Val, gesturing to a plastic bowl where breasts, legs, thighs and wings have been marinating in blood-colored barbecue sauce.

The boy says, Get over it, Mom. Chicken is old cabbage.

Yeah, says the girl. Old cabbage.

The boy says, She's copying me.

Val is a sport. She looks at Marin and shrugs. Old cabbage, she says. I don't know where he got that.

Marin has a beer with her frank. She catches Carter glancing at the beer from across the table. She has not had a drink in nearly a year. But she can tonight. Marin stopped breastfeeding a week ago. She was an underproducer. When the child was born she could pump just an ounce from the right breast, two from the left. Carter kept a chart. The pediatrician told her to drink more water. She did, constantly, but it was never enough. The baby had to get fifty-one percent of his milk from the breast, Carter said. Fifty-one *at least*. Marin tried Mother's Milk herbal tea. She tried blessed thistle. One fenugreek capsule a day. Two. Three. A prescription for Reglan. Still, she was expressing only three ounces on the right and two on the left. His word, *expressing*. Finally, they went to formula entirely. Another disappointment her husband has endured silently.

Or silently until today. In the rental car on the drive up from Reno he asked whether she was experiencing any pain from stopping. Any pressure.

No, she said.

No, said Carter, thoughtfully. I guess you wouldn't.

After dinner the troop roasts marshmallows. The boy inevitably pokes his sister with his roasting stick. She cries and pouts and is not satisfied until Val puts him in time-out in the cabin of the RV. In the commotion of discipline and fairness, Marin retrieves another beer from the cooler.

Carter fetches the diaper bag and mixes a bottle using the jug of distilled water he bought at the store. He feeds his son,

burps him, and passes the child to Marin. She paces with him around the site, waiting for him to fall asleep. Val, Jake and Carter sit in camp chairs near the fire. Jake smokes a cigar.

The little girl—Sophie is her name—climbs into her mother's lap and squirms there. She asks, What does that baby like?

Val strokes her hair. I don't know, Bug. Why don't you ask Marin?

Who's Marin?

The baby's mommy.

The girl considers this and then takes leave of Val, scrambling into dusty stride with Marin. Marin? she says. What does your baby like?

Marin considers the question. He likes milk, she says. And baths in the sink. And binkies.

And toys? asks Sophie.

And toys, says Marin.

What does he do?

Not much, really. Eats and sleeps, mostly. Poops.

Marin thought this would make the girl laugh, but it doesn't. Sophie considers the information, then says, Because he's just a baby.

That's right.

Can I hold him?

Marin glances at Carter. He is watching them. Of course you can, says Marin.

Marin directs Sophie to sit in her folding chair and extend her arms along her lap. She lays the child in this cradle and rotates the girl's hands at the wrist so they curl around the

baby. There, she says. Just like that. Carter watches. Sophie is stern faced, taking this responsibility seriously. Though her feet swing a little, gleefully.

Marin retrieves her beer from the mesh pouch of the chair. You're good at that, she says, then immediately regrets it when the girl smiles a smile so wide it requires the active involvement of all her facial features. Christ, thinks Marin, what a thing to say.

Just then, Sophie's brother emerges from time-out. The boy processes the scene—the baby in his sister's lap, all adult eyes on her—and says, No fair. I want to hold the baby.

Sophie is pure joy. You can't, Aidan, she says. *I am.*

Aidan says, But—

Carter stands. The baby has to go to sleep now, he says. It's his bedtime.

Marin scoops the child from Sophie's lap and follows Carter to the RV. Inside, Carter tries to set up the Pack 'n Play they've brought—never *playpen*—so the baby can sleep there. Val and Jake have two tents, one for themselves and one for the children. It will be too cold for the baby to sleep outside, which is why Carter and Marin were offered the RV in the first place. But now it appears the Pack 'n Play is too wide, the space in the RV too narrow. Carter allows the half-expanded structure to fall noisily to the floor.

Now what are we supposed to do? he says.

As though Marin designed the Pack 'n Play. As though she engineered the RV. She says, What about the bed?

Carter considers the bed Val has folded out for them,

converted from two bench seats and the dining table. Will he roll? he asks.

How surprised Marin is to be asked this. How satisfying it feels that Carter does not have the answer.

No, she says, shaking her head casually. He can't roll.

Okay, Carter says. He builds a barrier of pillows and sleeping bags at the edge of the bed. He swaddles the child and lays him on his back—always on his back—in the center of the bed. As Carter pulls the door of the RV quietly closed, he pauses with a hand still on the knob. The smell of Jake's cigar has made its way to them. Those pillows, says Carter. You sure he'll be okay?

He'll be *fine*, she says. He can't roll.

Of course he can't roll. She wouldn't have suggested putting him on the bed if he could. The baby is too young to roll. He won't roll for weeks. The books say so. The pediatrician says so. He can reach his arms above his head and sometimes he sort of scissor-kicks his legs inside his sacklike pajamas, but he cannot roll.

But the baby *can* roll. Once, she laid him on his back in the center of their bed back home, in the adobe house. He was asleep. Carter was at work. She hopped into the shower. She had to. She had a cheesy something behind her ears and in the creases of her knees. She washed her hair and used the lather from the shampoo to wash her body. She did not use conditioner. She did not shave. She kept the bathroom door open. Five minutes, tops. She stepped out of the shower and looked into the bedroom and the baby was not where she'd left him.

She ran to the bed, naked, dripping wet. Then she saw him. Half wedged beneath her own plump pillow. Still breathing. Thank *God*, still breathing. She lifted the pillow. He must have rolled in his sleep. How true, she thought, once the panic began to recede, once the baby was laid safely in the Pack 'n Play, once she was dry and dressing. To be capable of a thing only in a dreamworld. This was two weeks ago, nearly. She never told Carter.

Outside, Jake and Val put the children to bed in their tent, finally, and the adults settle into the story world of old friends. Marin gets another beer. Bent over the cooler, she can feel the warmth of the fire on her back and her husband watching her. She won't look to him. Not tonight. She won't see his once-fine face drooped with disappointment. She will not, *will not* look to him. She feels as though she has been looking to him her entire life.

Around the fire it is old times. Remember? they ask. Remember walking home through South Campus? Remember filling Sandy's mailbox with crushed beer cans? Remember our illiterate landlord on the Strand? Remember that note he left us; oh, how did it end? They all say it together, roaring: *I will not be tolerated.*

Jake brings out a pipe and a baggie from a cloth coin purse. He offers it to Carter.

Carter says, No, thanks, man.

Jake extends the pipe to Marin. Em?

Em. He used to call her that.

Marin takes it. What the hell? They smoke a bit, Marin, Val and Jake. After some time, Marin exhales and says, Remember when we used to climb up on my roof and smoke?

Jake smiles and says, Remember watching the fireworks from up there?

Marin says, Remember Tarv?

Christ, Tarv!

Jake's roommate. Tarv had gotten fucked up and was doing a happy jig to celebrate how fucked up he'd gotten when he stomped through the rotted roof of Marin's apartment building. Marin and Jake climbed down the ladder as fast as their laughter would allow them. They left Tarv wedged in the building, his leg dangling through a neighbor's bedroom ceiling. Remember, remember, remember. Whatever happened to Tarv? How did they turn out to be anyone other than who they were on that roof?

There is a little stretch of quiet and in this they can hear the distant voices of other campers and the hoot of a night bird. On the ground at Jake's feet Dingus runs a dream run, then whimpers, then is still. Val stands and announces she's going to bed. Everyone tells her good night. Marin looks at Carter, the firelight making long shadows on his face. He ignores her. For a moment she cannot remember why. She grows afraid. He is staring into the fire and she looks at it too. Her *husband* will not even *look* at her. Why? Where is he?

Marin tamps down her fear and goes to pee in the darkness. She can see stars while she's peeing, and these stars

remind her of the town they will return to. She realizes she has no one there and grows afraid again, out in the trees with her pants down.

Once, early on, Marin took Carter to visit her hometown, the T of two state routes in the Mojave desert. They drove there and spent a night at the motel where she and her childhood friends used to jump the fence to swim in the kidney-shaped swimming pool. He was the first man she'd brought home in a very long time. Jake had not been interested in that sort of thing.

That night, Marin and Carter swam in the pool, alone. He held her in the soft water and kissed her, the rough beginnings of his beard chafing against her neck and her jaw and her collarbone. When the pool lights turned off, he lifted her to the edge and untied the knot at the back of her neck. He took her nipples into his mouth, first one, then the other, and after he said, I've been wanting to do that all night. Then he pulled the crotch of her bathing suit to one side and fucked her like he hasn't since.

We used to play a game here, she told him, when they were finished. I forget what it was called. But the premise was this: Marco Polo without the calls. Someone was It and the rest of them would say nothing. The pool was small, but it hadn't seemed so then. Back then it seemed extravagant. Of course, visiting with Carter she saw that it was the least the town could do.

In the game, the It would have to *feel* where they were. No talking. No calling. Just old friends in the too-warm water.

There were times when the It would be right in front of you, and you would be holding your breath, and It would reach out and touch the lip of the pool instead of you. To get away you had to slip down into that silky chlorinated dream. How inadequate that felt, to It. To be so sure you were reaching for a friend. Someone who knew you. And to touch only concrete. The lip of a swimming pool. It ought to mean something.

She has to get back. She finds a firelight in the night and makes her way to it, hoping it is theirs.

Jake is there, alone. She sits beside him. Hey, she says.

Hey, he says.

Carter go to bed?

Jake nods to the RV. Baby was crying, he said. You didn't hear?

I never do.

Well. Jake stands. He laughs a little, to himself.

What? she says, standing and stepping toward him.

Remember when you pushed Miles into the fishpond? he says. At Corinne's parents'. Remember?

Marin nods. She remembers everything. She moves closer to Jake. She can smell cigar on him. She can see miniature reflections of the fire in his eyes. She can see herself underneath him.

He provoked me, she says, and hooks her fingers in the waist of his shorts.

Jake smiles and tilts his head to the right slightly, the way a curious bird might. Then he steps back, allowing her hands to fall from his waistband, shaking his head. He tosses

something—a twig? a pine needle?—into the fire. My God, he says, kindly. What a nightmare you must be.

Jake goes to bed and Marin sits in his chair and props her feet on the warm rocks near the fire. She puts her face in her hands. She lived alone once, for a year and a half, in the building where Tarv fell through the roof. Sometimes, in that aloneness, she did weird things. She walked around her apartment wearing a piece from a Halloween costume—a pair of white silk gloves, usually, or an eye patch—or as many pieces of jewelry as she could, or a bathing suit under her regular clothes. She took pieces of metal into her mouth to get a feel for them. A coin, a pin, an earring. In her bathroom mirror she flicked her eyeliner pencil twice on her upper lip to make the two tines of a dashing, charcoal-colored mustache. She would say words that she liked out loud. *Pith. Coalesce. Dirigible.* She wasn't lonely. It wasn't that. She was the opposite of lonely.

It has gotten late, somehow. Marin kicks dirt inadequately over the coals of the fire and goes to bed.

In the RV she wedges herself on one side of the bed. Carter is on the other. Between them, the child. Eleven weeks old tomorrow. As long as Carter's forearm. What does the child do? Lift his head. Reach. Speak in a tonguey language of all *ls* and *os*. Lie between them. On the drive to the airport this morning, the sun still not risen from the horizon, Carter said, quietly, This is not how I pictured things.

There is so little room on this arrow of bed. She can feel the bundle of child beside her. She is light with youth, with

once-love, and also heavy with the disintegration of these. In this specific gravity she slides into sleep.

She dreams she is wrestling with the copper retriever, groping in its mouth for the tennis ball. Grappling with Dingus on a rockless beach. Rolling through reeds. Green-gray follicles succumbing in the wind. They tumble. She is up to her elbows in the warm, wet lining of Dingus's dog cheeks. She is laughing, rolling over mounds of perfect hot white sand. In her sleep she says, What does your baby like? In her sleep she says, This is not how I pictured things. In her sleep she rolls on top of the child and suffocates him.

She wakes, too terrified to scream, and begins to dig at the blankets. There are so many of them—hundreds. The soft, papery blankets of babies, the substantial bulky blankets of adults. They all smell of wet dog. Carter is there. Right there. He moans. Between them—somewhere—is the mass of her child. Their child.

Then her hands touch skin. A very small body. She feels it in the dark.

Breathing. Alive. Yes, alive.

She lifts the baby, not gently, and presses him to her. The child begins to cry.

Carter sits up in the darkness. Where? he says, thick-tongued and sleepstruck. Not what. Not who. Where? *Where are you?*